



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ETHICS.

JULY, 1891.

THE MODERN CONCEPTION OF THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION.*

THE science of religion is one of the earliest and one of the latest of the sciences. It is one of the earliest: for philosophy is the child of religion, and its first efforts are spent in the endeavor to find some kind of *rationale* for the religious consciousness. On the other hand, it is one of the latest: and that for a twofold reason. It is not till quite modern times that the necessary data of the science, the facts to be explained, have become fully accessible; and even so far as they were accessible before, the ideas and principles by which it is possible to explain them had not been discovered, or, at least, had not been appreciated in their universal bearing. For, in the development of human thought there is always a double process, by which the ideas are brought to the facts, and the facts to the ideas; or, rather, these are two factors in one process, the warp and the woof, which are continually being woven together into the web of man's intellectual life. The growing curiosity which leads men to investigate relations of the world or of human life, hitherto neglected or even regarded as unworthy of notice, is the result of the development of man's spirit, and of the half-unconscious action of the new ideas which that development brings with it; and, on the

* The Introductory Lecture to the Gifford Course, St. Andrews, 1890-91.

other hand, these new ideas, as we become more definitely aware of them, not only give new interest to the facts, but enable us to explain them. This is a view of our intellectual progress which at once avoids the false empiricism that sees nothing in growing knowledge but an accumulation of objective materials, and the narrow *a priori* philosophy which regards truth as born, like Athena, from our brains, without the marriage of the soul with the world. It is undoubtedly in and through experience that all our knowledge comes, and looking inward without looking outward is a process which has never brought any fruit to the intelligence of man. *Nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu*. But, on the other hand, the world with which experience makes us acquainted is not something foreign to the intelligence, so that in seeking to understand it we must needs lose *ourselves*. On the contrary, it is just in the effort to understand the world that the intelligence grows and comes into possession of itself; and, conversely, its understanding of the world is conditioned by its own growth. The world cannot answer unless the mind question it, and the nature of its questions is at every step determined by the stage of development which it has itself attained. Hence it seems at one time to be utterly blind to facts which at a subsequent time become its central interest, just because it has then reached the point in its life at which these facts are the nutriment it needs for further growth. At this point, therefore, it feels constrained to ask a question which it has never asked before, and to collect eagerly the materials for an answer; and the same impulse also brings to more explicit consciousness the ideas by means of which the facts may be made intelligible. Thus, even in the most empirical process of science we have no mere importing into the mind of an external matter alien to its own nature, but the satisfaction of impulses arising out of that nature, which therefore leads in the end to a growing consciousness of itself. It would, indeed, be strange if it were otherwise. We can take into our bodies only what the nature of these bodies enables us to assimilate,—only what they can use to build themselves up into their matured structure. It would be strange if our *minds* were receptacles of

all kinds of matter, without reference to any need or constitution of their own. The mind, indeed, is in one point different from the body, as it has a *universal* appetite and can assimilate all kinds of materials of knowledge; for, in a sense, there is nothing alien to it. But it can do so only in its own way and in its own time, and it refuses or even repels any information which does not answer its own questions, and so contribute to its own development.

What is it, then, which has awakened the new modern interest in the science of religion, and has given rise to the persistent attempts which are now being made to investigate the facts of religious history in all times and places? What is it that has made us carry our eyes beyond the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which are directly connected with our own religious life, and beyond the classical mythology, which is immediately bound up with our literary culture,—that has set to our scholars the task of analyzing the Sacred Books of all nations, and seeking for the keys of all the mythologies? What is it that has raised the folk-lore, which was formerly left to children and old women, into an object of keen scientific curiosity, and made an army of careful observers record with such perseverance the crudest superstitions of savages, and their most wayward fancies about the constitution of the universe and the powers that rule over it? The folk-lore has not ceased to be childish, and, though it may carry in it some elements of genuine imagination, some hints at a poetic idealization of nature, which men will not willingly let die, it is not for these grains of gold that we turn over the infinite heaps of sand. Nothing can be more coarse and repulsive than are many of the superstitious customs of savages; nothing can be more absurd and irrational than most of their ideas as to the constitution of the natural and the spiritual world. No civilized being could possibly look to such a source, either for moral guidance or intellectual light. What lends them their interest must therefore be their bearing on some new question which we are forced to ask, their value as giving further definition or illustration of some principle which we seek to verify. I do not, of course, mean that every

one who feels the impulse to investigate in this new branch of inquiry is conscious of the full meaning of what he is doing. The spirit of the time enlists many servants to whom it does not communicate the purpose of the orders it gives them. Hundreds feel the pressure of a new desire, the stimulus of a new curiosity, for one who asks himself distinctly what it is that he wants, or why he seeks to fill his mind with facts which to a previous age would have seemed intellectual lumber, as useless to remember as the scandal of a village or the advertisements of a daily paper. But the *δαίμων* that thus possesses men is not a meaningless impulse, like a taste for collecting books whose value is their errata. It is a spiritual need, an intellectual and even a practical want of man's spirit, which has been awakened by its past growth, and the satisfaction of which is necessary to its further growth. Yet undoubtedly it is well for us not only to obey the spirit of the time, but also to ask what it means, to try to understand the interest which such inquiries awaken in us, and to estimate the good that can come to us by discovering the answer to them. For this, if we can attain it, will tend to give method and direction to our efforts after such answer, and it may to some extent prevent us from wandering into paths that lead to nothing, or attaching too much or too little importance to particular results.

A full answer to this question must be postponed till we get a little further in our investigations. But, in the mean time, it is possible to indicate generally one or two points which lie almost on the surface. First of all, we may observe that the idea of the *unity of mankind* has within the last century become not merely a dogma, but an almost instinctive presupposition of all civilized men, and that, at the same time, it has been freed from the theological reservations and saving clauses with which it was formerly encumbered even among the Christian nations, which had, in a sense, accepted it as a truth. We know now, in a way in which it was never known before, that humanity is a genus which has no proper species,—*i.e.*, that the divisions between men are as nothing in comparison with the fundamental fact of self-consciousness which unites them all to each other. Ancient society was

built on the principle of natural kinship, and therefore on a principle which carried with it tribal or national exclusiveness, even where it did not set up further barriers between the members of the society by immovable divisions of family from family, rank from rank, and caste from caste. The artificial unity of the Roman empire, however, with its equal justice and its rigid conception of the rights of the individual person, did much *negatively* to break down these walls of separation between Greek and barbarian, Jew and Gentile, patrician and plebeian, master and slave. And Christianity sought *positively* to knit men together by a spiritual bond of fellowship, of which all men were regarded as capable. And if this doctrine hid its levelling power in the very excess of an idealism, which treated all such distinctions as indifferent, and *therefore* allowed them to subsist; yet, by reducing them to the category of mere relative differences of worldly position, which a few years must terminate, and by disregarding them in the order of the church, it spread through all the nations which it reached, a consciousness of the infinite value of each individual soul and of the comparative unimportance of the things that in this world divide one man from, or set him above, another,—a consciousness which in the long run must be fatal to all absolute claims of superiority. The belief that the best which man has in him to do or to be, springs out of that which is common to all, and therefore that the highest good is open to all, is fatal to all systems of privilege, and it is equally fatal to all national exclusiveness. In the slow progress of humanity, indeed, there is always a long way between the premises and the conclusion, between the germinating of an idea in the religious life and its manifestation as a transforming social principle; and it may work for a long time unconsciously as such a principle before it is explicitly recognized in its universal meaning. Yet, though a thousand years are as one day in the secular process of development, which is the manifestation of the divine spirit in man, the days and the years come to an end, and the fruit follows by an inevitable necessity upon the seed. The application of this idea to the case before us it is not difficult to see. The hyper-idealism

of early Christianity refused to question the justice of slavery in private life and of despotism in the state. It declared that the powers that be are ordained of God, without asking how they had been established or how they exercised their authority. And the mediæval church was inclined in its asceticism rather to emphasize than to criticise the division between the spiritual and the secular orders, though it soon found itself forced by an inevitable logic to insist that the powers of the latter should be used in such a way as not to interfere with the higher interests of the former. But this claim inevitably grew into the demand of Hildebrand that the world should be subjected to the church. The Reformation brought with it a better solution of the difficulty, for it led to the denial of the division between world and church as anything more than a distinction of outward order, and to the assertion that the divine principle could be realized, and ought to be realized, in the life of the laity as much as in that of the clergy, in the state as much as in the church. In this way the theological limit to the realization of the divine principle in man was broken down. The new wine of Christian cosmopolitanism burst through the old bottles of spiritual and secular exclusiveness. The divine right of priests in the church and of a royal or noble class in the world was set aside for the divine right of humanity. And the idea of a unity in men deeper than all racial and social distinctions, deeper than all distinctions of culture or even of religion, became for the first time a living force. As usual, the first expression of this truth was extremely one-sided. The cosmopolitanism of the last century carried the abstract assertion of the equality of men to the paradox that civilization itself is a moral disadvantage, and that the genuine voice of humanity is to be heard only from the natural man, "the noble savage." But the irrational consequences of a theory which treats the unity of human nature as the negation of all the different forms in which it has been or can be realized must not hide from us the immense gain for man's intellectual and moral life which lies in the recognition of that unity. Looking at it in the former respect, with which we are more directly concerned,

we see that it furnished the intellectual key to a problem which the increasing intercourse of mankind, since the discovery of the New World, had been pressing upon men's minds with ever greater insistence. The conviction that God has formed of one blood all the nations that dwell upon the earth—interpreted as meaning that, as regards that which is deepest and most important in human nature, men are essentially equal—supplied for the first time a point of view from which human life in all its heights and depths, and in the whole range of its history, could be brought within the sphere of science. 'It swept away at once the literary prejudices which caused classical models to be regarded as the only humane letters, and the religious prejudices which consecrated the history of the chosen people and of the early Christian church as the only sacred history. Above all, it set to science the problem how, out of our common humanity, we can explain the almost infinitely diversified forms of culture, literary, social, and religious, which we meet with in different times and in different parts of the world. If we are not to count anything human alien to us, we must be able to understand every such form, not merely in the sense of gathering together the facts regarding it, and observing their general character, or even of discovering the laws of their co-existence and succession, but in the sense of throwing ourselves into them, realizing the states of mind in which they arose, the process of thought and feeling by which they grew, and the connection of the results to which they developed, with our own life and thought. In other words, this principle makes us conscious that we have not solved the scientific problem suggested by the lives of other men till we are able to live them over again, to reproduce their movement in living imagination, and to repeat in conscious thought the unconscious logic of their growth. It is this desire for a living picture, still more for a *rationale*, of human life in all its forms, which prompts our minute research into even the most trivial point of custom and observance, of myth and doctrine, in ancient and modern nations, which makes our anthropologists at once so greedy of facts and so eagerly anxious to penetrate through the mere facts to the

principle that explains their genesis. We want not only to believe in the unity of man, the identity of the spirit of humanity in all times and places, but to *see* it; and we cannot see it aright unless we both *feel* and *think* it, unless both by imagination and reason we can realize how, under the conditions, we might ourselves have developed into such ways of thinking and living. It is this impulse to realize and revivify the facts,—to make the past into a living present, while yet we understand its inner meaning in a way in which the present can never be understood by those who live in it,—it is this that characterizes the modern scientific spirit and differentiates it so completely from a mere casual and external curiosity. It is manifest that such an impulse can never be satisfied with any mere empirical collection of information, which still leaves us on the outside of that which we are observing, or, indeed, with anything short of a real appreciation, both sympathetic and intuitive, of the nature of the process by which the one spirit of man manifests itself in all this difference of forms, and through them all is continually advancing to a fuller realization and a deeper comprehension of itself.

And this leads me finally to point out that it is not merely the bare idea of the unity of man which now furnishes the guiding principle of science in this department, but the idea of that unity *as manifesting itself in an organic process of development*, first, in particular societies, and, secondly, in the life of humanity as a whole. This also is an idea which has gradually been gaining ground ever since the beginning of the Christian era, but which has for the first time taken an effective form, as an instrument of science, in the present day. The favorite idea of the ancient world, an idea presented in early Greek philosophy, was that of a cycle of changes in which genesis *from* the original unity and return *to* it, or, as we should say, differentiation and integration, are not united, but follow each other. This idea seems to be adopted even by Aristotle. Among the Romans the constant march of the state through campaign after campaign, century after century, to the empire of the world, suggested to Livy the conception of a process of outward growth, which, however, seemed to him

to be accompanied by inward decay ; for the power and wealth which patriotism and discipline had won had, in his opinion, proved in the end fatal to the virtues which gave rise to them. Among the Jews prophecy,—in so far as it was not a mere arbitrary anticipation, but a foresight based upon insight,—implied a discernment of seeds of good and evil in the present which must necessarily ripen to a harvest of greater good and evil in the future ; and, in this sense, prophecy is just development read forward. And when Christ spoke of his own ethical doctrine as a fulfilment of that which potentially or in germ was contained in the law, and at the same time represented that doctrine as itself only a grain of mustard-seed which was one day to grow into the greatest of all trees, still more when he spoke of the corn of wheat that was to multiply by dying, he gave a clearer expression to the idea of development than it had ever before received, and even perhaps than it has received till quite recent times. By St. Paul the idea was caught up and presented in a more imposing though less suggestive form, under the guise of a great providential world-drama in which the whole history of the Jews is viewed as a long legal preparation for the new era of the Gospel ; and the same idea appears in St. Augustine's "City of God," only with the additional thought that another act of the same drama is found in the history of the Romans, by whom a universal empire was gradually built up to provide a peaceful sphere for the operations of the universal Church. This conception of the two "preparations for the Gospel,"—the outward and the inward preparations,—and of the union of the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church as the result of their coalescence, furnished the guiding principle of what we may call the mediæval philosophy of history ; and, as such, it is presented to us in the great poem of Dante. But for a deeper and less spectacular expression of that connection between the different phases of the life of individuals, of nations, and of humanity, which we call development, we have to wait till a much later time. The intuitive genius of Vico discerned the importance of the idea at the dawn of the modern period ; but the full perception of its value as a key to the history of man and of

the world was reserved for the end of last and the beginning of this century. It was then that Lessing, Kant, and Herder gave that decisive impulse under which the principle of development was carried into biology by Goethe, Schelling, and many eminent scientific men, while Hegel made it the leading idea of his philosophy, subjected it to a more penetrating analysis than it had ever before received, and applied it with wonderful insight and grasp to the political, the artistic, the religious, and the philosophical history of man. After these we need only refer to the names of Lamarck and Comte in France, of Darwin and Spencer in England, and of Von Hartmann and Wundt in Germany, as writers who have done much to throw light on various aspects of the idea and to give it new applications. We may, indeed, say without much exaggeration that the thought of almost all the great speculative or scientific writers of the present day has been governed and guided by the principle of development, if not directly devoted to its illustration.

It is by its aid, and by its aid only, that the other idea of which we have already spoken—the idea of the unity of mankind—can be made fully intelligible and applicable to the facts of history. In other words, the unity of mankind must for our purpose be interpreted as involving not only the identity of human nature in all its various manifestations in all nations and countries, but also as implying that in their *co-existence* these manifestations can be connected together as different correlated phases of one life, and that in their *succession* they can be shown to be the necessary stages of its evolution. This, and no less than this, is the ideal set before us by the conception of development,—the great watchword of science in our time. In fact, this corollary cannot now be disjoined from the principle of the unity of man itself. For if it be true that we can find light in the history of man only as we throw ourselves into it and live it over again in ourselves, it is only by the aid of the idea of evolution that we can bridge over the gulf between ourselves and the men of an earlier and simpler stage of culture. Without the aid of this idea our sympathies will not stretch far enough. It is indeed comparatively easy

for us to recognize the identity of a common nature through the differences of language and custom that separate us from nations like the modern Germans or French, who stand, on the whole, on the same level of civilization and are embraced in the same general spirit of the time with ourselves. With a further stretch of effort we can reach back to those previous stages of culture that still survive in a recognizable form in our own lives. We can make ourselves citizens of Rome or Athens, because in literature and philosophy, in politics and legal institutions, Rome and Athens still live with us as easily distinguishable influences. And our religion still preserves so much of its Jewish root that it is not very difficult for us to realize in some measure the spirit of the prophets and psalmists of Israel. But when we have to widen our view and extend the same living sympathy—the sympathy out of which alone true knowledge can spring—to early India and Egypt, to the primitive civilizations of Babylon and Mexico and Peru,—still more, when we have to include in our idea of humanity the lives of utterly uncivilized races and to realize the first obscure beginnings of religion and morality, nay, even to reproduce the dawn of unconscious reason in the formation of language,—the line seems to be stretched to the breaking-point. And it must needs break if it were not for the help of the idea of evolution, which has at once created a new interest in the earliest vestiges of human life, and has supplied the key for their explanation. This idea, in fact, is the most potent instrument for bringing back difference to identity which has ever been put into the hands of science, and, without it, it would be impossible to hope for a real understanding of the facts of the history of man, a problem which in its complexity and difficulty includes and transcends the complexities and difficulties of all the other sciences.

To sum up what has been said. We have seen that the studies usually embraced under the name of anthropology, and of which the science of religion is one of the most important, have risen into a prominence and attracted an attention unprecedented in any previous time, not only because the extension of our knowledge of the world's inhabitants and of

their history has supplied the materials for it, but because the progress of man's intelligence has brought with it certain ideas, which at once excite our interest in such inquiries, and furnish us with a guide in undertaking them,—a means of solving the difficulties which arise in the course of them. These ideas are the ideas of the unity of man, of the organic connection of life between the different parts of the human family and between the different stages in the secular development of man's spirit, to which all the various forms of culture in all the nations of the world ultimately serve as contributions. These ideas we do not put forward as dogmas,—for, indeed, there are many difficulties, both in their analysis and their verification, on which we have as yet said nothing,—but we point to them as indicating the problems with which at the present time it has become necessary for science to deal, the questions which by its own development the human spirit is required to answer. This necessity lies in the fact that it is only through a deepened consciousness of the world that the human spirit can solve its own problem. Especially is this true in the region of anthropology. For the inner life of the individual is deep and full, just in proportion to the width of his relations to other men and things, and the consciousness of what he is in himself as a spiritual being is possible only through a comprehension of the position of the individual life in the great secular process by which the intellectual and moral life of humanity has grown and is growing. Hence the highest practical as well as speculative interests of men are connected with the new extension of science which has given fresh interest and meaning to the whole history of the race.

Now, these remarks have special application to the history of religion. Without as yet attempting to define religion, or to give any precise account of its characteristics, we may go so far as to say that in a man's religion we have expressed his ultimate attitude to the universe, the summed-up meaning and purport of his whole consciousness of things. How and how far he rises above the parts to the whole, how and how far he gathers his scattered consciousness of the world and of himself to a unity, how and how far he makes anything like a

final return upon himself from all his fortunes and experiences of things, is shown more clearly in his religion than in any other expression of his inner life. Whatever else religion may be, it undoubtedly is the sphere in which man's spiritual experience reaches the utmost concentration, in which, if at all, man takes up a definite attitude towards his whole natural and spiritual environment. In short, it is the highest form of his consciousness of himself in his relation to all other things and beings, so that if we want a brief abstract and epitome of the man, we must seek for it here or nowhere. But just for this reason the problem presented by the history of religion contains in an intensified form all the difficulties which we find in all the other aspects of man's life. All the complexity and diversity, all the opposition and conflict, which makes it so hard to find a principle of law and order in the life of man as a physical, moral, and intellectual being, reach their extreme form in his religious history. Hence those who sought to found their definition of religion on some quality common to all religions have found it hard to come to any result whatever; for in his religious life man has sounded the whole gamut of possible forms of consciousness from the highest inspiration to the lowest superstition. Thus, to take a few instances, there are religions of terror and religions of love, religions of hope and religions of despair, religions in which the gods seem to be worshipped mainly as beings who can help or hinder man's effort after his own finite ends, and religions in which he is called on to make absolute surrender of all such ends, and even to merge his very life in the infinite. Whatever element be named as essential to religion, it seems easy to oppose a negative instance to it. Thus Kant tells us that "without a belief in a future life no religion can be conceived to exist." But, to mention only the most obvious facts, the early Jewish religion was without such a belief; and, if it has formed a part of most religions, yet there are many in which it was by no means a prominent or important part. The religions of classical antiquity were for the most part centred in the domestic or the national life, and the immortality thought of by their votaries was the immortality of the

family or the state. On the other hand, there have been nations, such as the Egyptians, for which the concerns of the other world and the future life seemed altogether to dwarf the interests of the present. The Egyptian lived among tombs whose size and splendor reduced into insignificance the dwellings of the living, and the most characteristic features of his mythology were representations of the death and resurrection of nature in winter and summer, as types symbolizing the death and resurrection of man. Again, in its attitude towards *nature*, religion has passed through every phase which it is possible to conceive, from that of the Vedic hymns, in which the "bright ones," the heavens and the earth, the sun and the moon, with the various elemental powers of storm and wind, are the only distinctly-recognized divinities, to the religion of the Jew, which abhors any mingling of the creature with the Creator, and treats nature not as the manifestation of God, but rather as a weapon in his hand, which he has made, and which he breaks in pieces when he has done with it; or, finally, to the religion of the Buddhist, which treats the whole objective world as an illusion, from which it is the highest aim of the devotee to free himself. Again, the religious view of *man himself* and his relation to the divine being passes through a similar series of kaleidoscopic changes in the course of the history of religion. Sometimes, as in Greece, he is the one finite being, whose form is transferable to the divine, and the gods are above all regarded as the powers that preside over the life of the family or the state. Sometimes, on the other hand, man seems to seek his gods as far as possible from himself, and to find divinity in plants, in animals, in almost anything and everything rather than in humanity. Nay, anthropologists have found good evidence of a state of civilization, in which men could think of kinship as a sacred bond only when they regarded it as a participation in the blood of a *zoomorphic* or *phytomorphic* god or totem. Again, it would seem to be essential to all religion to hold to the objective reality of God as apart from the religious sentiment of his worshippers, and in some forms of religion He is even treated as a purely external power, with whom no inward

relation is possible. Yet we find at least one great religion,—that of Buddha—which begins with the negation of all the objective gods of earlier Hindooism, or the reduction of them to parts in the great illusion of outward existence, and which at last finds the divine only in the self-negating process of the finite mind, and the *Nirvana* which is supposed to be its result. Finally, even within the compass of the one religion, we find something analogous to all these forms. For Christianity, in the course of its history, passes through phases which recall the opposite forms of polytheism and monotheism, of pantheism and dualism. We find it at one time united with the ascetic morality of the cloister, which carries the negation of nature to the verge of self-annihilation, and at another time associated with an ethics which idealizes the natural desires and affections, and a poetry which finds God in nature. These variations are so great that it cannot seem wonderful if some are inclined to deny that there is any unity beneath them, or that the succession of religions is anything but the play of the wayward fancy of man in a region which is outside of the sphere of reason and experience. Yet even so, the problem of their change would form part of the general problem of human history. Even if religion were a madness of humanity, an illusory form of consciousness destined ultimately to disappear, there must be a method in it which we are interested to discover. We cannot suppose any great province of the life of rational beings to lie outside of the general development of reason. Even atheism or agnosticism involves a definite attitude towards the ultimate problem of human life, and if it is the highest attitude possible to man, it must show itself to be the last term, or one of the elements in the last term, in which the whole process of development is summed up. For the modern ideas of the organic unity and the organic evolution of man, which are the presuppositions underlying all our investigation into the history of humanity, inevitably compel us to seek for the one principle of life which masks itself in all these various forms, and which through them all is striving towards the full realization of itself.